

Thomas Luckmann (Zagreb 2006):

## **Personal Identity as a Sociological Category**

### 1. Introduction

Words such as personal identity, individual identity and the like are of relatively recent origin. Yet they express concepts that inherited many of the conceptual and theoretical connotations associated with the older notions of individuality and individualism. From the eighteenth to the twentieth century these notions marked the terms of the intellectual struggle for the articulation of a viable social order, both in relation and in opposition to such concepts as society and community. Another term with a history of its own that was largely absorbed by personal identity and personality concepts was character. In the course of the twentieth century the socio-political connotations of identity concepts faded whereas the psychological implications, linking identity to some "inner self" gained in importance.

One of the central presuppositions, underlying all arguments and theories was that personal identity was something specifically human. In the tradition of European philosophy, both in its Greek, Hebrew and Christian roots, an individuated personal form of existence was considered to be uniquely human. It is still taken for granted as a fact in our contemporary common sense. Only the biological sciences such as primatology and human ethology, insofar as they find any sense in that concept at all, consider personal identity in an evolutionary perspective.

In our common sense view of things we take it for granted that personal identity is something that arises from within. This view is the heir of an older, long dominant idealistic tradition in philosophy for which individual identity was only conceivable as emerging from an elementary stratum of the subject: The Self was thought to be self-constituted. Until the last few decades philosophical discourse largely tended to neglect the rather more differentiated views on the social and biological genesis of the Self proposed in the twenties and thirties of the last century by Max Scheler and Helmuth Plessner. A preference for studies of "measurable" and "scalable" self-concepts or a fascination with Freudian, Jungian and kindred speculation on the psychodynamics of personality development led to an analogous early neglect of George Herbert Mead's theory of the Self in psychology.

I began arguing more than thirty years ago that personal identity was a sociological category of similar importance as social institution and that it was not self-constituted but intersubjectively constructed. Taking up certain ideas of

philosophical anthropology, especially that of Helmuth Plessner, of the social philosophy of George Herbert Mead and James Horton Cooley, I described the processes of intersubjective mirroring as the source of the social construction of personal identity. On the basis of the findings of modern ethology and primatology, I tried to account for the evolutionary emergence of personal identity, primarily through the individualization of social relations among primates and early hominids. I then turned to the changes in the historical, social-structural conditions in the formation of personal identity<sup>1</sup>.

Instead of restating extensively the line of thought concerning the evolution and intersubjective constitution of personal identity, I shall merely summarize it. Then I propose to turn directly to a discussion of the intersubjective construction of personal identities in different historical epochs and different types of social organization.

## 2) Evolutionary emergence and intersubjective constitution of personal identity

The origins of personal identity point back to an early phase in hominisation, as do the origins of institutions. The joint evolutionary emergence of personal identity and institution during a transitional period of uncertain length must have been contiguous to the development of symbolically transmitted tradition, to the beginning of "history", to the time when the actions of past generations became a constitutive dimension of human existence, to the time when social reality embodied in institutions thus became a kind of second nature.

The debate on hominisation in primatology, human biology and paleoanthropology continues, in consequence of genetic analyses by which the hominoid lineage and the closeness of Bonobos and chimpanzees to humans were established beyond much doubt, and as a result of the most recent finds which substantially extended the time scale of hominisation. The various strands of evolution which were a necessary presupposition in hominisation and eventually in the emergence of the life form of *Homo sapiens* cannot be considered separately. Personal identity can be explained only by reference to the joint, interdependent evolution of body and mind. One must consider together skeletal transformations, upright posture, opposition of the thumb, changes in the vocal chords, increase in brain capacity, hemispheric specialization and corresponding transformations of the structure of

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<sup>1</sup> Several publications and lectures were devoted to these concerns, among them an early one in Zagreb almost twenty years ago. The latest version, on which this lecture is based, was presented to medieval scholars in Auxerre in 2003

consciousness, linking them to catastrophic or slow climatic changes, changes in milieu, such as the presumed shift from forest to savanna, and to changes in the requirements of social organization.

Among the changes in social life the most important was the increasing individualization of social relations. After the early bond with the mother, it must have become advantageous for individual members of the hominid species to learn how to be oriented to other members as particular individuals with a specific propensity to act in particular ways. Such orientation rested on the ability to take the perspective of the Other. Social relations must be highly individualized before particular actions are remembered and responsibility for them is ascribed to particular actors.

In the terms of Plessner's philosophical anthropology one may say that personal identity begins to form when an individual, eccentrically positioned in the world by the triad of its body, living body and the unity of the two, recognizes himself or herself in the perspective of others. This implies that individuals experience their actions not only in their own "inner" perspective but also in the perspective of others, as if they were the others, from the "outside". When individuals see themselves as agents, they perceive others as originators of actions. On the principle of the reciprocity of perspectives, they take notice that as they are holding others responsible for their actions, others hold them responsible for what they do themselves. Here one can clearly see the close relation that ties personal identity to institution. Control of actions and self-discipline do not simply appear by themselves at some point in childhood; they are inculcated by the expectations of significant others, expectations that can be directly enforced in the family and the small face-to-face community. The expectations are defined by a given world view and enforced with institutional support. The normative ideas, the *idées directrices* that define the goals and procedures of institutions, determine the framework of "objective" meaning for the face-to-face interactions in which personal identity is constituted. Conversely, in the functioning of historical institutions, an individual organism's conscious control of its actions and at least a minimal degree of self-discipline is taken for granted. In social interaction the child begins to acquire both practical rules and ideal norms, a language (or two), rules for the use of language, proper ways to walk, eat, drink and eliminate, dress, fight and make peace, make love and die. Only if one succeeds in all this to some - socially defined - extent is one accorded the status of a normal person.

### 3. Social structure as the frame of personal identity formation

In my discussion of the structural determinants of personal identity I shall juxtapose two strongly simplified types, the early one of small "archaic" communities and the contemporary one of late modern Western society. To be sure, some "archaic" elements in the formation of personal identity persisted well into the Middle Ages, and on the periphery of the centers of historical change even beyond the early modern period. On the other hand, several aspects of social structure and collective mentality, which many among us thought to have originated in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, had their roots in a much earlier period. The ideal-typical simplifications of the archaic and the modern structural conditions in the formation of personal identity should be therefore understood as an attempt to provide a comparatively simple frame for the analysis of overlapping processes of great complexity.

Societies are not simply more or less complex; they differ in the degree of complexity with regard to many dimensions some of which are directly or indirectly connected to the natural environment as well as to each other: the division of labour, roaming and settlement patterns, demographic composition, the class/caste structure, political organization and kinship, and they differ with regard to the degree in which these dimensions are institutionally specialized, and form, or do not form, functional "sub-systems". In immediate or mediated relation to the social structural conditions, societies differ in the social distribution of various kinds of knowledge, knowledge of nature, technological, medical, religious, communicative knowledge and particular rhetorical skills, and, after the invention of writing, in literacy. They also differ in the conception of "normality", of good and evil, and of the nature of ordinary and transcendent reality. All this of course means that different societies develop variations on the basic scheme in the formation of personal identities, and, if the variant patterns are consciously articulated in some educational "theory", also of different models of personal identity. The latter stand in a changing relationship to the actual patterns. Actual practices may be a nearly faithful reflection of identity models or they may be rather far removed from them.

The variety is not unlimited. Several basic types emerged in the course of human history of which one, the earliest, lasted in several sub-varieties for the largest part of human "pre-history" and history, and the latest is limited to modern societies. I shall try to sketch a rough outline of the two types, neglecting here the important intermediate pattern of personal identity formation in the European Middle Ages. It may be unnecessary to repeat that simplification is unavoidable. What I describe as the "archaic" type includes hunting and gathering societies, Polynesian and other horticultural islands and early nomadic tribal societies. Variations of the prototype developed in all of

them. Furthermore, in villages and on the outskirts of the ancient civilizations, both of the *polis* type and in the empires defined as "oriental despotisms", in which a type that anticipated many features of the the Western medieval one had replaced the "archaic" type, nomadic variants of the "archaic" pattern persisted for a long time.

#### a) The early example: "archaic" societies

"Archaic" social organization was generally characterized by low complexity except in matters of kinship. Both the division of labor and the social distribution of knowledge were relatively simple. Kinship, complex in its fine terminological and behavioral differentiation, was clearly, hierarchically<sup>2</sup> organized. Social interaction in these societies were defined mainly in terms of the prevailing kinship structure, "realistically" or at least in metaphoric extension of kin categories to other social relations. Interactions, which - because of their obvious function - we would regard as economic, political or religious, were integrated into the kinship system. Thus not only the earliest but also most of the later social relations belonged to the sphere of kinship. Personal identities were formed exclusively in immediate, face-to-face, intimate social relations. In the small communities everybody knew everybody and everybody was known to everybody. Communication was limited to relatively few persons, but the density of communication with the few was relatively high.

Kin meant familiarity; non-kin were usually strangers, often enemies. Familiarity, of course, did not necessarily mean sympathy, but among family members there was a binding relationship and normally some sort of mutual support was taken for granted. Who was a significant other in the formation of personal identity (e.g., mother's elder brother), and for which period, (e.g., until initiation) was unequivocally regulated. Social interactions, mainly in the context of kinship, were meaningful within a unitary conception of the good life. Under such circumstances the complexity of the kinship system did not preclude consistency in the patterns of intersubjective mirroring. The formation of personal identity was relatively unproblematic.

Most people became what they were expected to become, and what they themselves expected to become from childhood onward. Starting out with

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<sup>2</sup> The degree to which the hierarchy of ranking was articulated varied; so did the style of hierarchical control. Many hunters and gatherers lived in relatively "egalitarian" societies, e.g., the Pygmies and Inuit, in contradistinction to most pastoral nomads. No "archaic" society is known to have developed the extreme of political hierarchization reached in oriental despotism.

certain character dispositions, these were either reinforced or suppressed (more or less effectively) by an "identity model" selected by significant others from a well-defined and relatively limited range of variants. In consequence of the correspondingly high density of face-to-face communication, individual identities were integrated into the group as a matter of course. Magical conceptions of identity supported the fusion of individual identities into the "ethnocentric identity" of the community.

As everywhere and at all times, people growing up in such communities may have been content with their fate or oppressed by a hard life. In either case they were likely to feel at home in their community and, in a manner of speaking, also at home with themselves. It hardly needs to be said that within kin relations, too, conflicts of interest would arise. Solidarity may often bond people more strongly in opposition to the outside than internally to one another. In many of these societies life was hard, survival often problematic. What was not problematic was identity, except perhaps at the margins of the community - if such communities did have margins. There it might have been less "natural" to be to oneself what one was to others.

Life in such societies produced little motivation for self-reflection (even assuming that one had time for it). But in such societies, too, there were particular occasions where an individual was likely to think about his or her own life in relation to others, most often in transitional phases. The *rites de passage* of tribal societies, for example, with periods of seclusion, asceticism, pain, excess etc. were an occasion for heightened self-awareness. and when witnessing the death of others, especially of significant others, aspects of identity may have been thought about. While this hardly produced elaborate forms of self-reflection or anything resembling identity "crises" in the modern sense, it must have led to some heightened awareness of self.

#### b) The late example: late modern societies

Obviously, the situation is different in modern societies. These are complex in everything but kinship. In outline. it is well known how the change occurred. Traditional social structures were profoundly transformed as a result of the increasing specialization of social functions. The process determined a new institutional setting for public life and, in modernity, seeped deep even into the more intimate spaces of everyday life. This transformation was of central importance in setting the frame for social relations, the frame within which personal identities were formed in modern societies.

Centuries before the spread of Christianity in the Roman Empire, the main economic and political functions of collective life in the Mediterranean world had ceased to be organized mainly, if not exclusively through kinship. Somewhat later, Christianity moved from the highly diverse forms in which it grew in the first centuries to the post-Constantinian (and post-Theodosian) church first as a *religio licita* to the more unified, even monolithic form as the established church of the Empire. Thus religious functions, too, became specialized in a new institutional pattern. After the dissolution of the Western Empire, the Church maintained that institutionally specialized ecclesiastic form throughout many transformations by which it adapted to new circumstances. At the same time, while the other institutional domains regressed. The economy returned to the level of subsistence production and politics was "retribalized".

The administrative rationalization progressively introduced by the church and, on a less concrete level, the emerging individualization of conscience as a result of pious practices (*e.g.*, confession) were factors in making Christianity so overwhelmingly important in the formation of medieval society and, perhaps paradoxically, in also setting the stage for several components of "modernization" long before the emergence of the "Protestant Ethic" in Calvinist congregations. It would not serve the limited purpose of this lecture to review the explanations, which were offered by historians and sociologists for the transformation of medieval Europe into early modern and eventually late modern societies<sup>3</sup>.

Whatever the causes, however long the transition, and however strong the *Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen* might have been, in the centers of "modernization" the conditions for the formation of personal identities came to differ significantly since the 19. and more widely since the 20. century from those prevailing in the Middle Ages and in early modern times.

Institutions had become increasingly specialized with respect to one dominant function such as the production and distribution of goods and services, the exercise of power, reproduction, education, and the collective organization of how to cope with the extra-ordinary in life, *e.g.*, death, and with the transcendence of life, *e.g.*, God. In the process they shed most other functions earlier associated with it in "primitive" fusion of functions. At the same time, institutions serving the same main function tended to coalesce. They formed institutional domains that were relatively independent from those norms that were not functionally rational. Political, economic and religious institutions

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<sup>3</sup> In any case, I am not able to assess adequately either Macfarlane's revision of Max Weber and his suggestion of an early, uniquely English way to individualism and modernity, or Simon Schama's partial revision of Weber's ideal-typical Dutch Calvinist burgher.

began to regulate actions within their own sphere without considering "external" norms. Only legal institutions, in an ever-increasing juridification of collective life, became involved in the formal regulation of action across different institutional functions, replacing the normative influence of religion and traditional morality. More strongly than ever, the conduct of life became segmented into coherent performance blocks, performance being defined and regulated institutionally in terms of maximum utility. Whereas this is obvious in the case of the economy and the state, it is in a limited sense also the case for religion and kinship. Religious institutions lose much of their public, political and moral function and become privatized, kinship tends toward small, self-contained individualized units.

In consequence, social interaction in the work place, in public *fora*, in church and to a certain extent in the home, follows distinctly different, separate norms. The meaning of institutionally segregated sequences of action in the course of an individual's day becomes "specialized", and cannot be easily transferred from one domain to the other, e.g., from family to work, from church to politics. The urgency of what is to be done and the importance of how it is to be done are defined in terms of anonymous, impersonal institutional norms. These are neither integrated into encompassing models of the good life nor do they derive their legitimacy from a transcendent reality. In performing anonymously defined social roles, the individual temporarily loses much of his or her quality as a person. For the duration of each performance he is, for all practical purposes, a substitute. The point is not that this leads to a loss of self or to alienation. Individuals find secondary meaning in their role performances, which they may be able to link to the purposes of their lives. The point is that there is dissociation between public goals and private purposes to a substantially more pronounced degree than in other types of society, "archaic", ancient, medieval. Paradoxically, this is the case at the same time that autonomous selfhood becomes an almost doctrinal obligation for the modern individual! The functioning of the modern state and the modern economy presupposes rationalization of norms, bureaucratization of procedures and, consequently, impersonality. It no longer requires the formation of specific types of personal identity; it needs adaptable individuals. Institutional controls, such as obligatory schooling, the labor market and the police seem to suffice both in the early preparation, the later training and recruitment, and, if necessary, the disciplining of individuals as role performers.

The social order of modern society provides a changed legal and economic basis for family and educational systems. It no longer provides a model for the good life and for the good person either by the mediation of family and schools or by some other more direct way - beyond loose conceptions of the responsible



citizen. Thus the family seems to be essentially on its own. Yet the vacuum is filled with an enormous commercialized and semi-professionalized support apparatus of welfare, counseling and "therapeutic" enterprises. However, they, too, are without clear goals. One may therefore say with some exaggeration that - with the partial exception of the earliest social interactions in the family, more precisely, in some families - the formation of personal identity no longer follows a clearly designed social model.

Elsewhere I tried to indicate the social-structural antecedents of this state of affairs in which the present situation differs from superficially similar earlier developments. To be sure, long before modernity the Stoic, then the Christian and the Humanist educational ideals stressed the rational potential either of the individual mind or the salvational potential of the individual soul. But they also provided strong social support for well-defined goals and they were limited, in the main, to aristocracies and the "educated classes". In late modernity, however, for the first time in history, identity formation becomes, on a mass scale, a predominantly private rather than a social matter.

Functional specialization of institutions may be considered the main cause of the profound transformation in the conditions under which personal identities are formed in the modern world. The complex social distribution of knowledge, knowledge understood in a narrow sense, is, of course, again a consequence of institutional specialization. The complex division of labor leads to the exponential growth of specialized theoretical, technological and practical knowledge. With regard to the concrete goals of personal identity formation, however, another factor is the complex distribution of values and, more generally, of world views. The availability of different world views and of the values associated with them within the same society is mainly due to another cause, modern pluralism.

When the barriers which characterized "classical" pluralism break down, there is substantially more interpenetration of world views and values. Social and

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<sup>4</sup> The main examples are the Hellenistic civilization, the Roman Empire, the Crusader States, Muslim Spain, the Mogul and Ottoman dominions, as, for example, Bosnia. To a certain extent, they also differed from one another. Contacts were mainly in commerce; there was occupational specialization, by castes, for example, there were territorial and legal ghettos. The various groups generally maintained their own world; the things they took for granted were rarely called in question. However, the separation of the groups was far from air-tight. Knowledge of various kinds (from philosophy and medicine to architecture and cuisine), on various levels (especially that of the elites), even if not circulating freely, passed through the "fences" surrounding the separate groups such as the strict segregation of connubium and commensality.

economic segregation of large minorities in ghettos is much less rigid than in former "pluralist" situations, interaction in various spheres of collective life is normalized, although still in the minority, "mixed" marriages are on the increase. Mass tourism also provides opportunities for the "encounter of cultures". In addition, the presentation of other ways of life in the mass media has become all but pervasive.

Another, related point: In Europe the influence, which the great Christian churches had upon the hopes and fears, the imagination and the concerns of everyday life of the overwhelming majority of the population for more than a millennium, is now limited to small islands in a sea of indifference. Although traditional Christian faith was not given up everywhere in Europe, its institutions have become marginal. There has been some, numerically not very impressive, growth of churches near or beyond the margin of traditional Catholic, Protestant and Eastern Orthodox Christianity: Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, New Paradigm churches, Mormons etc. (Their growth in North and Latin America is another matter). Through the printed and electronic media and by way of mass tourism, Buddhist and Hindu conceptions have found a foothold.

In sum: Christianity lost its all-important role in the formation of personal identity. The institutions of the church no longer decisively influence education; hell, a disciplining force in the "building of character", has all but disappeared from the imagination of the people. While so-called secularization affected the Christian churches in Europe, great Muslim enclaves were formed in France, the United Kingdom and Germany, and smaller ones elsewhere. At least for a generation, they seem to provide traditional frameworks for the formation of personal identity. They do so under adverse conditions, which favor either secular assimilation or its opposite, fundamentalist radicalization.

More recently, more rapidly and more dramatically than was the case with the Christian churches, the remnants of the old political religions on the right and left have also become marginal, in fact, even more marginal. It remains to be seen whether the apocalyptic and ascetic ecological milieus will be more successful in overcoming secular indifference. The evidence, from public opinion polling, "value studies" or merely a visit to a bookstore in any major city in Europe and the U.S.A. so far points to a continuing preponderance of New Age bricolage and related forms of narcissism, from old style positive thinking, self-fulfillment and self-realization to emerging "wellness" cults. The details are ephemeral. They kept changing rapidly during the past thirty, forty years. However, the essentials of the overall situation remained the

same. Reasonably stable world views with a concrete core of values are no longer transmitted consistently in primary and secondary socialization.

In the formation of personal identity the things that one takes for granted about nature, other people, one's own closest circle, and the wider social world are, of course, of central importance. Under the conditions of modern pluralism only the earliest, admittedly the most important, face-to-face interactions normally still provide a relatively solid base of such things. Beyond this base, however, that which others seem to take for granted challenges whatever one takes for granted oneself. One may still hold on to old certainties - but, as they have become relativized, one can no longer do so in a quasi-automatic fashion. One clings to them in a different way, either more hesitantly or more aggressively. Modern pluralism thus has a subjective side, which marks all modern societies, although rather differently in Europe, North America and Japan.

The transformations of the social structure, institutional specialization, and modern pluralism, left the formation of personal identity to the family, without providing either concrete models or social support. It would be an exaggeration to say that the modern family is well equipped to do the job alone, but it muddles along. The subsequent stabilization of personal identity is even more ambivalent: it has become a private enterprise. The social structure in modern societies does not provide the conditions that could guarantee a fair amount of long-term consistency in the intersubjective construction of personal identity. For a number of reasons, social-structural conditions do not favor consistency even in the earliest social interactions in the family. When it comes the transition from primary to secondary socialization, a break in continuity is built into the fabric of modern life. This may produce "identity crises". The self-help, self-improvement literature which is even more voluminous than sexual "fulfillment" advice, indicate that, if not the frequency of identity crises, then certainly that of identity confusion is on the rise.

However, the main effect of modern life on the formation of personal identity types is less obvious. In late modernity, a wide range of actions that one must perform in the course of life became impersonal. The meaning of much that one has to do has become dissociated from the core of personal identity and removed from the qualities of character. Many things that one has taken for granted have a short life-span. They keep changing or slip away entirely within one's life-time. Living in society always requires adaptation. However, in later modernity the social structure favors a particularly high degree of adaptability, not only of a cognitive but also characterological nature. In the absence of a strong, resistant core in the world view, a religious one, for example, the dominant modern personality type will be adaptable - or other-directed, if one

prefers David Riesman's terms - in a more pronounced fashion than the identity types of earlier societies.

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<sup>5</sup> More than half a century ago Riesman, Glazer und Denney diagnosed the replacement of "tradition"-directed and "inner-directed" personalities by the "other"-directed personality.

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